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The circular logic of humanitarian expertise

This post is part of a series linked to the workshop “Assessing the Anthropology of Humanitarianism: Ethnography, Impact, Critique”.

Experts, as paradigmatic figures of modernity (Mitchell 2002), occupy a central place in contemporary policy making. They embody the human drive for governing the world via the use of rational reason. The term finds its origins in the Latin ‘*experitus*’, from *experior*, which means ‘to test’ or ‘to prove’. Most dictionaries agree on the knowledge-based dimension of such experience, which characterizes an expert and puts emphasis on the technical and scientific nature of expert knowledge.

Expertise is also associated with decision-making processes (Rabier 2007).

Indeed, expertise generally consists of establishing a diagnosis of knowledge in a problematic situation, as part of a mission integrated into a decision-making process that is not controlled by the expert. The lack of control over the political motivations behind the request for expertise and over the presentation, interpretation and use of the final results are other elements that distinguish the work of the expert from the one of the researcher (Théry 2005). However, the notion of expertise also refers to the value of excellence, widely shared across professional spheres. The position an expert occupies at the intersection of citizens, policymakers and scientists, and the implicit link between knowledge and values, are important sources of tension which make the production of 'expertise' a highly ambiguous task.

However, the confidence in experts seems to have gradually eroded over time. Expertise has been criticized for silencing local knowledge and for adhering to the preferences of those able to determine the political agenda (Domènech 2017). Ironically, in spite of these critiques, appeals to expertise is growing as never before because of the increasing reliance on techno-scientific evidence in modern governance practices (Limoges 1993).

In the context of humanitarian policymaking, the systematic use of experts to inform decision-making has gone hand in hand with the watering down of the meaning of 'humanity' – a central motive of humanitarianism. Indeed, the techno-legal devices mobilised by the bureaucratic processes of expertise tend to keep the meaning of humanity 'within the brackets' (Riles 1998), referring to both 'nothing' and to an infinite number of possibilities within the limits imposed by the specific linguistic genre of 'expert reports'.

Furthermore, the bureaucratic artifacts of expertise are not essentially meant to achieve clarity on a specific issue but rather serve to nurture a network of professionals bound together by a concern for 'the aesthetics of logic and language' (Riles 1998, 386). Therefore, the main purpose of expert knowledge production is not to 'provide evidence' but rather to materialise a sociality organised around aesthetic form. In other words, the documents are 'boundary objects', acting as the social glue through which expertise is authorized and an epistemic community is created and maintained.

Humanitarian expertise can therefore be conceived as a sort of performance. It is less something a professional has acquired through experience (even though this

is undeniably the case too) than something (s)he has come to excel at through repetitive performances. In other words, it is through the mastery of conscientiously choreographed practices of document production and bureaucratic rituals of authorization (embodied in meetings, conferences and workshops) that one qualifies as an ‘expert’.

This emphasis on ‘processes’ and ‘forms’ as effective carriers of ‘evidence’ denotes a commitment for action for lack of a concrete vision of the future. The tasks forces, working groups and conferences that humanitarian expertise relies on to achieve legitimacy tend to maintain ‘the reality on the ground’ that is supposed to inform policy ‘within the brackets’, to use the title of Riles’ 1998 *American Anthropologist* article (Riles 1998). Indeed, the ‘humanity’ embodied by the ‘people’ that such activities are ultimately meant to serve remains hidden from view, behind the documents and the processes that lead to their collective production. Expert knowledge, as a fragile product of negotiations, implicitly requires “the co-production of ignorance” (Mathews 2008).

The “parrhesiastic contract” (Foucault 2001) which authorizes expertise is therefore essentially contingent upon aesthetic practices of document production and technocratic performances. Such performances are anchored in repetitions and necessitate fluency in complex aesthetic registers. An expert, to be acknowledged as such, has to develop a command not only of the rules and modalities of these bureaucratic rituals, but also of the language of the artifacts they generate. While enabling a greater diversity of actors to engage in the process of knowledge production, such procedures simultaneously tend to tame dissenting voices by subtly coercing actors to adopt the standards and dispositions of experts. To become audible and ‘be part of the parade’ (Schia 2013), actors have to adopt the ‘mindset of the template’. From an anthropological perspective, expert reports may not be interesting for what they say but rather for the sociality they enable to nurture and maintain. As ‘boundary objects’, they ‘allow dialogue but preserve a certain structure of institutional power’ (Mosse 2011, 61).

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REFLECTIONS

BUREAUCRACY, EXPERTISE, HUMANITARIANISM

